

**Benjamin H. Latrobe to Thomas Jefferson, March 7,
1818, from Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital.
Edited by Saul K. Padover.**

Latrobe to Jefferson

Baltimore, March 7th. 1818.

THOS. JEFFERSON ESQR.

Monticello

Dear Sir,

I arrived here with my family on the 12th. of Jany. and a few days afterwards was taken ill of my old complaint, the Hemicrania, a complaint in which no one, I believe, can more heartily sympathise with me than yourself, as I believe you are often severely afflicted with it. I was confined to my room for three weeks. Immediately on my recovery I was called to Annapolis to examine the bar at the mouth of the harbor with a view to a proposition to Government for the Establishment of the Naval Depot at that place. The bar is composed entirely of *blue mud*, a stratum which occurs constantly & in regular succession in the geological formation of the country. If it is this stratum, which not easily yielding to the attrition of water has remained higher than the sandy strata above & below it, or if it is, — what all blue clay, ooze, or marsh mud is, — the product of marine water acting upon vegetable matter, and has been thrown in by the Chesapeake, (as its form indicates); in either case it is easily removed, & will not be redeposited, or at all events, many centuries must elapse before it will be again produced. My report, will, I presume, be printed in which case, I will immediately transmitt to you a copy of it.

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I did not remove into the house which I have taken here untill my return from Annapolis, and could not get it so arranged as to enable me to unpack my books untill 2 days ago, when I found the enclosed book of prices. — I have added to it, the prices allowed by myself & paid within the last six months. Any good workman can make a good profit upon them. — Here in Baltimore the same secrecy is observed, by the measurer's, that obtains in Philadelphia. The price book, as there, exists only in manuscript. This combination cannot last many Years. It will bring in a competition from New England, which will break it up. In Philadelphia it will be more durable, being supported by a rich & numerous Guild, the Carpenters company, into which it is the interest of every young workman to be enrolled.

I much fear that I shall be under the necessity of appealing to Congress, or the public on the business of the Capitol. Mr. Lane being an inmate of the Presidents family, has had influence enough to prevent my being even heard: — and I feel every day the effect of the situation in which I am relatively to the President. And yet out of the President's house no man is less respected that [sic] the Commissioner. For the President personally no one has more respect than myself. I suffer from the regular course

of so bad a system as that of the public buildings. But I will not trespass upon the time or patience, which you have so many more agreeable & useful means of employing; than to hear my complaints, further, than by extracting from public documents, the following facts which show the effect of the system formerly established by you, *virtually*, in which the architect could controul the expenses, by controuling the contracts, & the manner of working, compared with the management of Commissioners, who had no professional knowledge.

1795 to 1801 Cost of the N. Wing of Lath & plaister internally, half finished, & in decay, under the first Commissioners. — Stone 6\$ p Ton, bricks 4.50 to 6\$ p M \$307.735.38

1804 to 180774

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74 In 1803 very little was done. Congress sat in the *Oven* 1804–1805 even. [Note of Latrobe in the original text.]

Cost of the South wing, magnificently executed, finished in all its parts, vaulted & filled with Sculpture 274.841.01 ½

Stone 8 — 12\$ p Ton, bricks 8\$ p M. Repairs & finishing of the West side of the North wing in the stile of the South wing 1806 & 1807 28.142.25

610.718.64½

Expenses of repairs 1815–1818

Appropriation 1815 500,000

1816 125,000

1817 200,000

825,000

If of this sum of 825,000, \$225,000 be allowed for the president's house, there will have been expended on the repairs of the Capitol alone, which are not half finished, 600,000. Now there remained after the conflagration: All the external walls of the Capitol uninjured, excepting in the Architraves of some of the windows, — all the vaulting of every kind internally, — many rooms wholly uninjured, — in fact work which, on reference to my books, had cost 190,000 in the South wing, & I presume 200,000 in the North wing!!! — and yet I must bear the blame of all this, — *even a hearing being refused met!*

I hope you will forgive my intruding this statement upon you. I know it to be useless at present to attempt to swim against the current. It will turn of itself in time.

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I enclose a pamphlet which I printed some time ago. Please to receive it as a mark of the unalterable respect & attachment with which I am

Yrs B H Latrobe

[Ms., *Jefferson Papers*, Library of Congress.]

THOS. JEFFERSON ESQR.

Washington, March 30th, 1818.

Sir,

In resigning my office as Surveyor of the Capitol, I publicly assigned those reasons which were personal. It was my intention to lay those that regarded the public interests, before the proper authorities: but a severe illness, which confined me immediately after my removal from the city, and especially the consideration of the thanklessness, and general uselessness of every attempt of an individual to correct what he may think improper in the administration of a public concern, in which he has had a share, have prevented my taking the steps proposed.

On my present visit to Washington, I have, however, found that the old charge against me, of extravagance, in the expenditure on the public buildings is still alive: and the authority on which it is asserted is so respectable, that I owe it to my interests and character to refute it.

This I can most effectually do, by comparing the cost of the capitol, during the period from 1803, to 1811, while I had a controul over the expenditures, with the expenditure on the same objects, during the time before and after that period. For, since the period of the restoration of the public buildings, from the year 1814, I have not only had no controul over the expenditures, in the remotest degree, but not even a knowledge of their

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nature and amount. And I must also remark, that the restoration of the capitol ought not to have cost \$50,000 more than the parts restored had originally cost, notwithstanding all improvements and alterations. It would be a waste of time and paper to enter here into the details producing this sum, but whenever required I shall be ready to explain them.

NORTH WING OF THE CAPITOL

1. The north wing of the capitol, left unfinished by the first commissioners,⁷⁵

⁷⁵ See the commissioner's book, and the President's message, March 25, 1808. [Footnote in the original text.]

stands charged with \$337,735 38

To this must be added a portion of the general expenses of the commissioners' office,⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Report to the Senate by the superintendent, December 16, 1808. [Footnote in the original text.]

63,005 38

Of temporary buildings 1,890 32

Of the cost of the freestone — island of Acquia 6,000 00

73,895 70

Or somewhat less than one-fourth of the sum expended in 1808, on all the public buildings, in contingencies 18,000

355,735 38

I omit any proportion of the article for commissions of agents, &c. of \$59,033 52, in order to avoid overcharge. As this includes the cost of all the foundations of the south wing and centre, &c. deduct a most ample allowance therefor⁷⁷

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77 President's Message, March 25, 1808, and report. [Footnote in the original text.]

30,000

Actual cost of the unfinished north wing \$325,735 38

SOUTH WING OF THE CAPITOL

In 1803, the situation of Congress, in the north wing of the capitol, and in the temporary building on the foundations of the south wing, was so inconvenient, that it was resolved to build the south wing, and I was appointed surveyor of the public buildings. From that time, 1803 to 1811, I became, and hold myself principally responsible for the economy of the work. 50,000 dollars were then appropriated to the public buildings generally, and to the highways. The series of state papers, in the Library of Congress, having been destroyed by the British, they have been restored to the year 1809; between which years, and 1814, there is a chasm. Not having been able to refer here to any other collection, I cannot give a detailed synopsis of the expenditures on each object of appropriation from the year 1810 to 1811. But my object in this statement will be attained, by an appeal to the letter of the superintendent of the city, of December 16, 1808, and the President's message of March 25th, 1808, enclosing my annual report.

From the former it appears, that the south wing, which was then finished, and had been occupied for a year, was charged with 323,234 26

From which deduct the items in my report, of March 25, 1808 12,433 00

Furniture. (See ditto.) 21,216 34

Pulling down condemned walls, clearing the ground, removing earth, making the road east of the capital, (as per the books in my possession) 2,318 00

Repairs of temporary buildings, 1803 555 13½

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Fitting up the temporary Representatives' Chamber, in the north wing 689 23

37,211 70½

Total cost of the south wing 286,022 55½

The north wing, from 1807 to 1810, was entirely changed in its interior, and built up up solidly, excepting on the west side which remained in a ruinous state at the invasion in 1814.

From 1803 to 1807, was expended in repairs 3,301 75

In 1807 24,840 50

Appropriation 1808, April 5, 25,000

1809, March 3, 20,000

Balance of accounts, 1812 6,857 75

Sculpture appropriation 4,000 00

84,000 00

To which add the sum amply sufficient to have completed the west side 26,000 00

110,000

If this sum be added to the cost of the north wing, as left by the commissioners, 325,735 38

It will produce a total of \$435,735 38

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I now appeal to the recollection of every one who has seen the capitol, prior to 1814, whether, after the completion of the works on both wings, prior to 1812, there was not ocular evidence of the vast superiority of workmanship, in its quality and expense in the south, to that in the north wing. If the work had been measured that superiority would be undeniably proved; and yet the north wing cost \$435,735 38

And the south wing, under my direction 286,022 55½

\$149,712 83

And if the enormous sum of near 50,000 dollars be allowed for the slight work in timber, lath and plaster which was pulled down to make room for solid vaulting, marble and sculpture, there will still remain a balance in favor of the south wing of \$100,000.

If I now compare the works executed under my directions, and controul of expenditure, with those that have since been constructed, the account will stand thus:

Appropriation, 1815 — \$500,000

1817 — 100,000

1818 — 200,000

800,000

Expenditures by the three commissioners,78

78 See the commissioner's report, February 16, 1818. [Footnote in the original text.]

1815–1816, on the capitol, 79,211 64

A proportion of contingent expenses, 3,800

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1817, By the one commissioner, 76,112 17

Contingent expences 1,000

1818, By Do 159,655 11

Estimate to compleat the same,79

79 I suppose the estimate to be sufficient. [Footnote in the original text.]

177,303 46

497,082 38

I have taken great pains, by examination of my books of measurement and estimate, to ascertain what was the actual cost of those parts of the south wing of the capitol which remained entirely uninjured; and have excluded every thing which may require reinstatement, as plastering, glass, and the whole of the wood work of every kind; as well as the sculpture and every part of the hall of Representatives, and find it amounts of 213,450 dollars. But least I should overrate its value, say 200,000

The north wing was more injured than the south, but a value (if the cost be considered as the value) remains, equal to that of the south wing: but to avoid overcharge, I will rate it only at 150,000

Total expense of restoring the wings of the capitol, including the value of the existing parts
\$847,082 38

I have proved above, that the south wing executed under my control, cost only 286,022
55½

And I have an undoubted right to claim, that if I had been in Washington and allowed the same control from the commencement, over the expenses of the north wing, which the

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superintendent allowed me over those of the south, it would not have exceeded it in cost, say 286,022 56

572,045 11

But to avoid all cavil, and in order to allow amply for the marble columns; without remarking on the management of that business, I will add the sum of 75,037 27

647,082 38

Balance in favor of my extravagance, 200,000

\$847,082 38

My object in these statements has been no other than a defence of my own conduct. They are supported by documents which may always be referred to. That part of them which depends upon calculation, speaks for itself. The amounts taken from my own books, are comparatively small, and make no difference in the general result. Had I entered further into details, a result much more favorable to me, would have appeared. But I content myself with resting my character on the proofs already adduced.

With great respect,

I am, &c.

B. Henry Latrobe, *Late surveyor of the public buildings, U. S.*

P.S. I will add, that independently of the value of the labor of my pupils, whom the public did not pay, except once, during a short term, the annual salaries, from 1803 to 1811, were \$3,800, and that the amount paid for the same services since 1814, agreeably to a statement of salaries, commissions and agencies, now before me, of which I have proof, but no official documents, exceeds, annually, \$16,000.

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[Printed statement, *Jefferson Papers*, Library of Congress. In the upper left hand corner of the first page, "Thos. Jefferson Esqr." is inscribed in Latrobe's hand.]